

Former Australian PM Rudd quits parliament

Peter Symonds
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Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced last Wednesday evening, on the first full parliamentary sitting day of the new Abbott government, that he was quitting parliament. In a move that was sudden, but not entirely unexpected, his departure produced an outpouring of nauseating accolades from his own Labor Party, the Greens and the ruling Liberal National Coalition. Numerous media commentaries dissected his career, but left the most obvious question unanswered: why was Rudd retiring from the parliamentary stage?

Relegated to the backbench after losing the September 2013 federal election, Rudd's own explanation was that there was no point "being here for the sake of being here." That only begs another question: why had Rudd become so marginalised just six years after winning a clear victory over the Coalition government of John Howard in 2007? According to conventional political wisdom, such a win should have assured Rudd at least two terms in office. Yet, in an unprecedented inner party coup, Rudd was ousted in June 2010 and replaced by his deputy Julia Gillard before even serving out his first term, setting the stage for three years of leadership infighting.

The media explanations for this turmoil focus entirely on Rudd's "egocentric" personality, his "flawed" leadership style and political "bastardry," as well as Gillard's overweening ambition. These traits, however, are hardly out of the ordinary for bourgeois politicians and, in normal times, would have largely remained in the background, at least in Rudd's first term. But the past six years have been far from normal. The upheavals in the Labor leadership have been the manner in which the deepening global crisis of capitalism, sharpening geopolitical rivalries—especially between the US and China—and developing working class opposition to the agenda of austerity have been refracted in Australia.

Rudd has not been sidelined because he failed to carry out the economic dictates of the corporate elite. During the 2007 election campaign, he positioned himself as a "fiscal conservative," echoing the criticisms of the corporate media that Howard had failed to press ahead with pro-market restructuring and had squandered the opportunities provided by booming mineral exports to China. Moreover, Rudd was the first Labor leader to openly embrace the legacy of the

1983-1996 Hawke-Keating Labor governments that ruthlessly deregulated the economy and presided over a massive shift of wealth up the income scale.

Labor, Coalition and Greens parliamentarians hailed what Treasurer Joe Hockey described, during Wednesday night's parliamentary session, as Rudd's "magnificent" apology to the Aboriginal people in February 2008. In fact, the "apology" was a cynical ploy designed to cover up the Labor government's continuation of Howard's military-police "intervention" into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, aimed at enforcing punitive measures such as welfare quarantining. The "apology" epitomised the Labor government's modus operandi—"progressive" window-dressing to implement the regressive policies of the corporate establishment.

When Rudd's government was rapidly overtaken by the global financial meltdown that erupted in September 2008, he provided an open-ended guarantee to the banks and implemented stimulus measures designed to prevent a slide into recession. Speaking for sections of finance capital, former Treasury secretary Ken Henry last week paid tribute to the Labor prime minister. Rudd "was so far ahead of where the world was, and a long way ahead of where we were in the Treasury," Henry declared. Moreover, in early 2010, as the demands of global capital shifted from stimulus to austerity, Rudd signalled that his government would rein back the public spending measures that were coming increasingly under fire in the media.

The real reason for Rudd's decision to quit parliament lies in the growing tensions between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. But the great unmentionable in Australian politics is the war preparations being made by the US, in collaboration with its allies, most particularly Australia, against China. That is why the past week's commentary has totally ignored Rudd's foreign policy. As a former career diplomat and fluent Mandarin-speaker, Rudd envisaged himself as a significant player on the international stage. But he took office as the worsening global economic crisis was producing sharp shifts in world politics. Significant sections of the American ruling elite, frustrated that President Bush had bogged the US down in unwinnable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan amid rising Chinese economic and political

influence, backed Obama as the means for reasserting US dominance in Asia.

What became known as Obama's "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic and military build-up against China—quickly came into conflict with Rudd's own initiatives. Rudd enunciated a "middle power" role for Australia in mediating rising tensions between the US and China through the establishment of an Asia Pacific Community. The proposal was an attempt to resolve the basic dilemma facing Australian imperialism, increasingly dependent economically on China, but completely reliant on the US military alliance to prosecute its own interests in the Pacific.

Rudd in no way opposed the US alliance, even telling US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that war against China might be necessary if all else failed. The Obama administration, however, was intent on confronting, not appeasing, China, and was not prepared to brook any vacillation from a key American ally. Rudd's ousting in June 2010 was orchestrated behind the scenes by Labor and union factional bosses, who, as WikiLeaks cables later revealed, were "protected sources" of the US embassy in Canberra. Immediately after her installation, Gillard emphasised her loyalty to Washington, holding a meeting with the American ambassador and a 20-minute phone conversation with Obama. In November 2011, Obama used the Australian parliament to formally announce the "pivot" in the Australian parliament and signed a deal with Gillard, behind the backs of the Labor party, the parliament and the Australian population, to station US Marines in Darwin.

Rudd returned to the cabinet as foreign minister in the unstable Greens-backed minority Labor government that emerged from the August 2010 election. But Gillard set the foreign policy orientation. Rudd patched up relations with the Obama administration, but he never resiled from his concerns that Washington and Beijing were heading toward a conflict that had to be avoided. Rudd continued to mount leadership challenges to Gillard—testimony to the continuing divisions within ruling circles over Australia's close integration into the US war preparations against China. Rudd also forged relations with political figures internationally, such as former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, similarly worried about the lurch toward a catastrophic war.

Rudd stood down as foreign minister in February 2012 in a failed bid to wrest the leadership from Gillard. In March 2013, another abortive leadership attempt collapsed ignominiously. In both cases, the factional heavyweights who installed Gillard stood firm. By June 2013, the Labor Party was facing electoral oblivion. Reviled for her role in Rudd's anti-democratic ousting and her government's anti-working class policies, Gillard's poll ratings plunged to historic lows. With a chorus of voices in the media warning of the collapse of the two-party system, Labor re-installed Rudd, the only political figure with any public standing, largely because of his status as the martyr of the 2010 coup.

The media and political establishment backed Rudd's reinstatement, but only to retain the Labor Party as a viable opposition. The press, with the Murdoch newspapers in the lead, campaigned to ensure that Rudd had no prospect of winning the September election. Bill Shorten, head of the "praetorian guard" that ousted Rudd in 2010, and a trusted figure in Washington, was installed as Labor leader.

In Shorten and Prime Minister Abbott, the Obama administration has two leaders committed to the "pivot" to Asia. Former Labor ministers supportive of Rudd's foreign policy have either quit parliament or been relegated to relatively insignificant posts. Ex-foreign minister Bob Carr, who was critical of Obama's speech to the Australian parliament, has retired. Former defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon is shadow agriculture spokesman.

Since Rudd was ousted in mid-2010, US-China tensions throughout the Indo-Pacific have sharpened dramatically. Just how central Australia is to US war plans against China was underlined by a recent report by the US-based thinktank, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA). The report details the basing requirements and military support that Washington requires from Canberra for its naval and air operations in the Indian and Pacific oceans. It comments on the divisions in Australian ruling circles over the US "pivot" and concludes that the debate is all but over, because Gillard "crossed the strategic Rubicon" by agreeing to position US Marines in Darwin.

This conclusion is somewhat premature, not least because the discussion has been made largely behind closed doors. The working class—the overwhelming majority of the population—is yet to speak. Nevertheless, Rudd is quitting parliament precisely because he no longer has any significant open support within the ruling establishment for his foreign policy orientation. While praising Rudd in parliament this week as "an extraordinary person," Abbott put the nail in his coffin by flatly ruling out appointing him to a diplomatic post, ensuring that Rudd has no official government platform from which to advocate his views.



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